

# KARAN KHANNA

UK and Ireland Managing Director,  
InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG)



## THE PROBLEM

When the lockdown measures were introduced across the UK in March 2020, a portfolio of 360 hotels needed to close in only a few days. Plunged into crisis management-mode, Khanna stewarded his teams and hotels using a combination of communication, calm, and willingness to change.

“ In the best of times good managers and leaders practise good communication: they are open, frank, directive, clear. This becomes even more imperative in a crisis. ”

For Khanna and his colleagues at IHG, this manifested as:

- **Two-way communication with all teams.** This helped senior managers to understand and appropriately respond to frontline challenges, and receive feedback about what did and didn't work.
- **Regular check-ins.** Communicating frequently (up to twice a day at the height of the crisis) allowed IHG's managers and leaders to process new information, how to act upon it, and assess what support was needed for staff at speed.
- **Cross-functional groups and taskforces.** Sharing expertise across various departments and creating central funnels of information enabled staff to act more effectively and efficiently by sharing expertise across various departments.

Khanna commented “Good leadership is delivering the very opposite of chaos and confusion. When your people are dealing with visceral fears about health and loss of livelihoods, you have to be calm. By no means is this easy, especially during a crisis that none have experienced before. Emotional intelligence is key, but conventional actions like reading body language have to be adapted when your team does not or cannot work in the same physical space.”

Khanna had to consider not only his own staff, but also the guests at IHG's various hotels. “Balancing the needs of both staff and clients teaches the valuable lesson of being able to change your mind; being open to new ideas, responsive to new information, and acknowledging that decisions are made with the best information available at the time, but may need to change depending on situational variations and developments.”

One example came from a decision to keep one London hotel open despite mass closure orders. “The core concern for both employees and guests was safety, but after ordering hotels to close, feedback came that one branch near a major London hospital was providing rooms to a lot of nurses. With teams able to operate safely, this particular hotel worked with the local council to serve the community by taking in nurses working at the nearby hospital, and domestic abuse victims without a safe home environment during lockdown. Thanks to two-way communication with the hotel's general manager, the focus changed from safety-first to community-first.”

Khanna said: “Naturally, processes have shifted as IHG transitioned out of the crisis into something akin to business-as-usual; daily check-ins have become weekly; focus has shifted from crisis-management to reopening, rebuilding, and recovery. But IHG's culture has shifted for the better - and hopefully, for good. There is more empathy and collaboration among staff, a camaraderie and sense of being a unified team with shared goals, even if their functions and duties varied.”

Khanna's goal is to continue both this and the more open communication that the pandemic crisis necessitated. Encouraging managers and leaders to remember that while a business is not a democracy, they should invite opinions and debate, and use these to inform decision-making. His experiences during the pandemic also taught him that it is good for managers to be aware of the expertise they lack, and to actively seek it out externally from experts and centres of excellence.

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